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FM AMEMBASSY RABAT
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INFO RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE
RUEHBS/AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS 3123
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 3466
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 5855
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 4865
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA 3747

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 RABAT 001838

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/12/2017

TAGS: [KISL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [MO](#)

SUBJECT: AL-ADL WAL IHSANE: MAJOR MOROCCAN ISLAMIST GROUP
HAS AN ANTI-TERROR MESSAGE

REF: A. RABAT 1522

[1](#)B. RABAT 1050

[1](#)C. RABAT 396

[1](#)D. 06 RABAT 1105

Classified by Polcouns Craig Karp for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Al-Adl wal-Ihsane, widely assessed as Morocco's largest Islamist organization, concluded its recent annual meeting warning of a "catastrophic" political and economic crisis in Morocco and calling for comprehensive reform, while flatly rejecting violence and terrorism. A prominent academic told us that the group had arrived at a "modus vivendi" with the government, which tolerates its activities in the interest of checking terrorist ideology. Downplaying the notion of an understanding with the GOM, a senior Ihsane leader readily emphasized to us the group's rejection of Wahabbi/Salafist theology. Our Ihsane contact also flatly denied that the group is in the business of social service delivery, but confirmed its strength on most Moroccan university campuses. The Ihsane leader complained that the USG does not pressure the GOM on "meaningful" reform or democratization. End summary.

An Enigmatic Islamist Force

[1](#)2. (C) Al-Adl wal Ihsane, aka the Justice and Charity Organization, or the Justice and Spirituality Organization (the latter being the group's preferred translation), is widely assessed as Morocco's largest Islamist organization. They have quasi-legal status (tolerated but not recognized by the government, allowed to operate relatively freely behind closed doors, but subjected to periodic legal harassment and prevented from holding public activities). No one is sure how many Ihsane members there are, with numbers ranging from five million (a figure previously attributed to an Ihsane spokesman) to 100,000 (a figure cited in the past by the GOM).

[1](#)3. (C) Al-Adl wal Ihsane has an Islamist socio-political agenda, rejecting secularism and advocating a return to "core religious values." The group eschews electoral politics, maintaining that the existing political system is too corrupt to be reformed from within. Some observers attribute the low participation rate (37 percent of registered voters) in the September elections, in part to Ihsane's position against voting (though the group did not organize a formal boycott effort).

[1](#)4. (C) The charismatic 83 year old Sufi Imam, Sheikh

Abdel-Salam Yassine, has led the group since it was founded in the early 1970s. Yassine is the author of dozens of books and tracts, mainly dealing in depth with theological and spiritual questions, offering only vague and indirect political prescriptions. (More specific political pronouncements have been left to the Ihsane's Guidance Council and its Political Bureau.) Ihsane has been a consistently shrill critic of the GOM, calling for comprehensive constitutional reform and, most controversially, refusing to acknowledge the King's claim to the religious title of Amir al-Moumineen (Commander of the Faithful).

"Together for the Sake of Salvation"

¶5. (C) Abdelouahed Al-Mutawakel (strictly protect), Chairman of Ihsane's Political Bureau and one of the seven members of the group's senior decision making body, the Guidance Council, briefed D/Polcouns December 11 on the group's annual National Council meeting, held December 8-9 in Sale, Rabat's adjacent, twin city. Chaired by Sheikh Yassine, Ihsane's National Council (al-Majlis al-Qatari), composed of 70 members from across Morocco, deliberated for two days at the modest villa in Sale that serves as the group's defacto national headquarters. Mutawakel declined to explain how the 70 National Council members are selected, but they are presumably leaders of regional subunits (naqaba) as well as heads of the group's various functional committees. Mutawakel, who has frequently complained of GOM harassment of the group and its members, said that the meeting attendees, and the Ihsane villa in Sale, were under overt GOM

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surveillance during the event, though the government allowed it to proceed without interference.

¶6. (C) The National Council meeting concluded on December 9 with a communique entitled "Together for the Sake of Salvation." Mutawakel, who passed us an advance copy of the statement published in booklet form, summarized for us what he saw as its three key points: First, that Morocco is suffering from a profound political and economic crisis, with moribund, unrepresentative institutions rejected and distrusted by the public; Second, that comprehensive constitutional and political reform offers the only solution; and Third, that such reform should be led through a inclusive consensus process involving citizen stakeholders from all walks of life and points of view.

¶7. (C) From our own read of the Arabic text, we also note the statement's criticism of other Moroccan political entities (implicitly including the legal Islamist Justice and Development Party - the PJD) for failing to show solidarity with Ihsane in the face of GOM repression. The communique also issued a flat condemnation of all forms of violence and terrorism (Ihsane, with a Sufi orientation, has been consistently critical of violent Wahabbi/Salafi Jihadism). The communique also concludes with an expression of solidarity with Palestinians and a call for Palestinian national unity, as well as a call for immediate and unconditional withdrawal of "Anglo-American forces" from Iraq.

A Suppressed Opposition...

¶8. (C) In our discussions with Ihsane, as well as in their public statements, the group has consistently and vociferously complained of GOM repression and harassment. A document Ihsane passed us recently states that since the GOM launched a crackdown in spring 2006, 4,513 members have been summoned for police questioning, with 167 legal cases filed against 821 members, with various fines levied against

against Ihsane members totaling approximately USD 700,000.

¶9. (C) In September, Mutawakel asserted to us that an engineer in Fes, an Ihsane member, had been wrongly convicted of manslaughter in a fabricated case, and in our December meeting, he cited as an example of ongoing harassment, an Ihsane shopkeeper in Fnediq (northern Morocco), recently prosecuted for failing to pay social security tax for a part-time worker in his store. Hearings in the most conspicuous legal case against the group, the prosecution of Sheikh Yassine's daughter Nadia, charged with defaming the monarchy in her writings, has been repeatedly postponed since ¶2005. The next hearing is scheduled for March 2008.

...Or a Defacto Partner?

¶10. (C) Mohammed Darif (protect), one of Morocco's most prominent and oft-quoted Islamic affairs analysts, argued to us during a December 6 meeting that the GOM and Ihsane, far from being implacable enemies, actually have a modus vivendi and recognize a sort of mutual dependence. Darif challenged the conventional wisdom that Ihsane refuses to recognize the monarchy, prompting the GOM to treat the group as a dangerous enemy of the state. If Ihsane truly denied the legitimacy of the monarchy, Darif argued, Sheikh Yassine would not have published an open letter to King Mohammed VI, as he did in 2000, making clear his view that the young King was innocent of the "sins" of his father and advising him to rid himself of his father's henchmen, crack down on corruption, and soften his approach to the Sahara question. (All pieces of advice, Darif dryly noted, the King ultimately followed.)

¶11. (C) Ihsane frequently resorts to the Moroccan legal system, filing suits, counter claims, and appeals, and appears to have full access to due process. Engaging in such legal actions, Darif argued, constitutes tacit recognition of the legitimacy of the state. The main point of contention, Darif continued, concerns not Ihsane's acceptance of the monarchy in principle, but its refusal to recognize the King's claim to the religious title of Amir al-Mumineen (Commander of the Faithful), a position which augments the monarch's political legitimacy with status as the Kingdom's leading Muslim. Even on this point, Darif asserted, Ihsane

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has been silent for several years.

¶12. (C) For its part, Darif maintained, the GOM sees the Sufi and consistently non-violent Ihsane as an important bulwark in Moroccan society against violent Salafist/Wahabbi thought.

In contrast to the Ihsane, Salafist Jihadism, which has been seeping into Morocco from the Middle East since the 1970s, has shown itself through the devastating 2003 bombings in Casablanca and during a series of frightening but abortive attacks in spring 2007, as a threat to the Kingdom's physical and economic security. Such incidents, even if abortive, are unacceptable in a country pinning its hopes on attracting foreign investment and tourists with its reputation for moderation and stability.

¶13. (C) The GOM's strategy, according to Darif, is to allow Ihsane to function, contained within narrow parameters, serving as a safe outlet for conservative religious tendencies in society while deflecting more dangerous Wahabbi currents. Ihsane Guidance Bureau member Mutawakel rejected this theory during our December 11 meeting with him, contending "Our position on the question of the Amir al-Mumineen is clear and unchanged... we do not have to restate it every few months." Mutawakel did acknowledge, however, that the GOM may see Ihsane as an important shield against the penetration of Salafist/Wahabbi thought in Morocco. We note the group emerged at the height of repression under King Hassan II and has been allowed by the state to operate, and grow since that time, while

periodically taking action to restrict its public activities and political outreach.

No Social Services (?)

¶14. (C) Many observers, including Ihsane's many critics and opponents, cite the group's presumed delivery of social services to Morocco's poor as a principle reason for the group's presumed strength and popularity. Among the Ihsane social services cited by Darif are subsidies for the poor to buy livestock (usually a sheep) to sacrifice for Eid al-Adha, financial assistance for those seeking to perform the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca), and even for the poor to throw a wedding party. Asked about social services, Ihsane leader Mutawakel did allow that the group may "facilitate" the delivery of some assistance to ensure that it reaches people who need it, but he flatly denied the group has a tangible social services network. "The government prevents us from doing anything like this," he stated. In contrast to Islamist groups in the Levant (e.g. Hamas and Hizbollah), Ihsane maintains no clinics, no vocational training centers, and no daycare facilities, Mutawakel maintained.

Big Men (and Women) on Campus

¶15. (C) Mutawakel acknowledged the truth of the common view that Ihsane maintains a weighty presence on university campuses across Morocco. The GOM does not like this, he observed, but has found the youthful enthusiasm and energy of its Ihsane students irrepressible. To counter this factor, Mutawakel charged, the GOM incites leftist student groups to "harass and violently assault our students," he claimed. In some cases, the GOM or its agents pay student "thugs" to roam among different campuses to make trouble and keep Ihsane students in check, he charged.

¶16. (C) Mutawakel recounted that leftist students had attempted to disrupt a speaking engagement he had recently at Meknes University, but the group had been outnumbered and pushed aside by the large and supportive Ihsane student crowd, he claimed. (Comment: We have heard conversely (and credibly) from leftist contacts that it is the Ihsane students who end to dominate and bully others on campus, also appointing themselves guardians of public morals, chastising their classmates for "improper" dress, alcohol consumption, etc. End comment.)

The USG Should Practice What it Preaches

¶17. (C) In our December 11 meeting, Ihsane leader Mutawakel complained that the USG claims to advocate democracy,

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transparent governance, and protection of human rights, but fails to put this rhetoric into practice in the Middle East and North Africa. USG praise for Jordan's recent elections was laughable, he contended, continuing "bias" against the Palestinians was irrefutable, and military intervention in Iraq was tragically misguided. As for Morocco, Mutawakel charged that most citizens believe the USG is supporting a corrupt and unjust regime which denies basic needs to the vast majority to the benefit of a tiny and obscenely wealthy elite.

¶18. (C) D/Polcouns countered that the USG has an unimpaired view of systemic weaknesses and areas for improvement in Morocco, and offers a comprehensive public accounting of these in the annual human rights report. We regularly engage with the GOM on human rights cases and to promote democracy. The USG also has a robust assistance program targeting the

education system and the employment gap, areas the Ihsane has identified as core problems. The USG is also committed to helping Moroccans combat public corruption and shore up the independence and transparency of the judiciary, he noted.

Comment

¶19. (C) We assess Al-Adl wal Ihsane will remain an important current in Morocco for the foreseeable future. Though a cult of personality around the charismatic Sheikh Yassine is one of the most obvious features of the group, the death of the octogenarian cleric, when it comes, is unlikely to derail the organization, which appears to have durable internal structures and a committed membership. The key question is if and when the group will modify its refusal to engage openly in the existing political arena. Such a change would have to be linked to a modification of Ihsane's stance toward the monarchy, potentially in exchange for a loosening of GOM restrictions on its public activities. For the moment, however, it seems that neither side is prepared to compromise, and indeed the GOM appears satisfied with the status quo. End comment.

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